

INTERNATIONAL CITY MANAGERS' ASSOCIATION
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METHODS OF REPORTING TO THE CITY COUNCIL

What are the best methods of keeping the council informed on municipal affairs?

One of the most important duties of the chief administrator is to keep the council currently informed on city government operations, finances, and suggested plans or policies for the future. City managers generally are required by charter to submit monthly reports to the council. In practice, however, managers also make oral and written reports at every council meeting and between meetings when the occasion warrants. Numerous matters that come before each council meeting are referred to the manager for study and report at a later meeting. The manager also initiates matters on which he reports to the council and makes recommendations.

Thus while the Council requests reports on many specific problems, the city manager must decide what to report and when, the amount of detail to be provided, and the most effective method of organizing and presenting information. Answers to these questions depend in part on the size of the council, frequency of council meetings, whether conference sessions are held before the regular meeting, the extent to which council committees are used, and the amount of information the council itself usually wants. The methods of reporting must vary to meet the requirements of individuals on the council, and a change in councils might necessitate a complete change in methods.

The important point is that the council must look to the manager for facts and information on matters which come before the council, and it is the manager's duty to keep the council fully informed on the more important administrative matters. Councilmen should not be bothered with administrative detail not essential to policy making. It is the manager's job to provide information on important factors the councilmen must consider in deciding policy and to present it in a way that will not absorb an undue amount of their time in carrying out the responsibilities of their high office. No matter what the content, the reports must be clear, concise, and readable.

The suggestions in this report, based on the experience of many city managers, may provide ideas for any city manager who studies the requirements of his particular local situation--ideas that will help him keep the council informed so that matters of policy may be decided on the basis of all the facts available and to the end that the council may know how effectively its policies are being carried out.

Some General Suggestions. The city manager occasionally should review the methods he uses in reporting to the council. Are council members kept informed on current activities so that they can give intelligent replies to questions from citizens? Do they have sufficient background information on important matters on which policies must be determined? Do they have adequate regular information on finances and operations to enable them to judge the effectiveness with which the manager administers municipal affairs, or do they receive long departmental reports that are seldom read? In reviewing these procedures the manager may find useful the following suggestions based on the experience of many managers:

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1. Set up a system of reporting to the council that is suitable to the situation and to the council and does not require too much time of the council.

2. Keep notes on matters that should be brought to the attention of the council and decide how best to inform them.

3. Make written reports attractive and readable by keeping them as brief as possible--presented in a logical method using subheadings as an aid in reading. Long detailed reports, when such reports are necessary, should be appended to a brief one-page summary which either sets forth the manager's recommendations or his conclusions.

4. Do not release any reports, either to the press or to anyone else, in advance of the council meeting.

5. If it appears that the council may take too hasty action on a given matter the manager may suggest that the council either defer action until he can report on it, or consider the appointment of a committee of councilmen with which the manager and department heads concerned can discuss the entire matter.

6. Before making a policy recommendation consider the desirability of sounding out the council ahead of time.

7. When an important matter of policy must be decided, consider preparing a special report and request the council to study it with the idea of acting upon it at the next meeting or at any other specified meeting. If the council is not interested at the time, the report can be laid aside and brought up later when discussion opens the way for the manager to produce the report for further argument.

8. When the manager presents a report with recommendations he should be able to answer all questions relating to the problem as well as advise the council on the reaction of those who would be affected by the policy.

9. In submitting reports on policy matters the manager should review the administrative problems that may arise. The manager should review all proposed ordinances to determine their effect on administration, and the council at all times should be given the manager's views because the council should know whether proposed ordinances can be enforced and administered. The manager may prepare ordinances and resolutions to submit to the council with his report on a given subject.

10. The manager should not initiate discussion with individual councilmen on any item of business before it is considered by the whole council unless the item concerns one of the council committees and then only with members of the committee. The manager must refrain from any actions on his part which might be construed as favoritism or partiality to any individual council member. For this reason he should see that all council members are given the same information before any action is taken. Sometimes the manager may be justified in discussing with the mayor or a committee chairman certain matters before they are presented to the council as a whole. But generally the manager deals with the council as a whole rather than with individual councilmen.

Written or Oral Reports?

Many councilmen take it for granted, according to one manager, "that everything is being administered satisfactorily unless they receive some special complaint," and for this reason they seem indifferent and do not always read written reports submitted by the manager. The experience of several managers reveals that among a council of seven members, two read every report and keep a file of all written

reports submitted to them, two councilmen hardly ever read them, and three others fall between these extremes. This may be considered as typical.

Every city manager, however, makes written reports to the council in the form of a typewritten memo or letter, mimeographed special report, or regular periodic report. The nature of the subject matter covered may determine whether a report is presented in written or oral form. Written reports usually are submitted on controversial subjects, on matters officially before the council, on policy matters referred to the manager, on items of general public interest, on matters that should be recorded in the council minutes (even though not read at the meeting), on matters that require council action, and on the financial condition of the city. Written reports are sometimes read by the manager at a conference session, by the clerk at the regular meeting, or merely received and filed--depending on the nature of the report and the wishes of the manager or council.

Oral reports of course can be presented only at the regular council meeting and at conference sessions that are held prior to the regular meeting. Some managers, because of their own or council preference, do most of their reporting orally. One manager with many years' experience, for example, makes his reports orally at council meetings using notes and records at hand. He generally makes written reports only when the council asks for such reports on specific subjects or when it is necessary to direct the council's attention to an important pending matter. A few managers prefer to report controversial matters orally rather than in writing. In fact many of the matters presented to the council at a conference session are not in writing because the project or problem may still be in the discussion stage.

There are certain practical advantages to a written report. Even if it is not read at time of presentation, it can be preserved for reference particularly if it is prepared for insertion in a binder. An oral report, on the other hand, may be completely forgotten a week after it is presented, or a dispute may subsequently arise as to its contents. If, as occasionally happens, a councilman complains that the manager has failed to report what has taken place, the manager is spared much embarrassment if he can refer to a written report that has been submitted, as a matter of record, and contains the facts in question. A written report has another advantage--it can be circulated outside the council if it is desirable to do so.

Actually there is no substantial disagreement as to the use of oral or written reports. Each has its place and each should be used where appropriate. Often there is no substitute for the oral or personal report, if it is well thought out and carefully presented. Most city councils have some members who receive information more readily in written form and other members who listen better than they read. Therefore if the reporting job is to be effective, the manager often must rely on both the oral and written techniques. A written report submitted in advance of the meeting or at the meeting allows the city manager to call attention to the most significant features when the item comes up on the agenda. An oral summary of this type may stimulate some discussion and will, in any event, remind the councilmen that the report contains important information which will answer some of their questions.

Types of Reports

A council needs two general types of reports--periodic and special. Such reports may be written or oral or both. Periodic reports usually cover finances and departmental activities designed to give the council information it needs to maintain an oversight of the administrative branch of the government. These reports

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disclose the financial condition of the city and summarize activities and work done, so that the council can determine whether the general policies and programs, which it has approved, are being favorably executed and standards of service met. Some city managers also mail reports to the council just prior to the council meeting. Special reports are made from time to time containing facts and recommendations relative to matters which are pending before the council or which are about to be presented to it.

Reports on Departmental Activities. Among the methods that can be used are: written monthly or quarterly reports, written and oral reports once or twice a year, or oral reports at every council meeting. Some managers merely transmit to the councilmen the reports that department heads prepare for the manager. This is not desirable because the council does not need a detailed report, for it is not the business of the council to regulate the details of departmental activities. Moreover, few councilmen will read a detailed report. The manager therefore should not submit to the council the monthly reports that are prepared by department heads for the manager.

A preferred plan is for the manager to submit to the council only a summary of the highlights of the departmental reports. The manager's report, if it is written, should summarize concisely the character, volume, and trend of operations and describe the progress and present status of improvement projects. Comparisons with previous months and years to show trends are useful. The significance of any data should be briefly pointed out. The report also can call attention to impending developments and future plans.

An example of a monthly report is that of Henrico County, Va. (40,000), where the manager submits a three or four-page mimeographed report to the county board each month. He includes a synopsis of department activities for the preceding month and a one-page financial summary showing revenues and expenditures for each month of the fiscal year to date. The report also includes several short paragraphs on the health, welfare, road, fire, police and other departments. At Grand Junction, Colo. (12,000), the manager issues a monthly report of about seven mimeographed pages, including one page comparing expenditures with the corresponding month of the previous year and the year to date. Short statistical and summary statements describe the month's activities of the various city departments.

Some managers believe it is best to make reports on department operations only once or twice a year. One manager with more than 25 years' experience, for example, keeps detailed monthly reports on the activities of the various departments available in his office for inspection both by the council members and by the public. These reports, kept in a loose-leaf binder, are presented to the council only upon their request or when it is desirable to make reference to a report for detailed information. The manager of this city summarizes the activities of each department once a year in the form of an oral report supplemented by charts and graphs comparing cost and other data with previous years.

The manager of another city with nearly 20 years' experience in a city of less than 10,000 population keeps notes during the week of matters which might be of interest to councilmen and reports orally at the weekly council meeting on operations, construction, contacts with the public, reaction of the public, and things which he believes the city should plan to do. The manager asks the council for their comments, criticisms, and suggestions. In this way councilmen are always kept informed on what is going on.

Excellent guides in selecting items to include in a monthly activities report are two publications of the International City Managers' Association: "Specifications for the Annual Municipal Report" (1948. 52pp. \$2), and "Monthly Administrative Reports for Cities" (1943. 32pp. \$1). No manager should use all of the items suggested in these reports. The first covers methods of reporting to citizens and the second suggests forms for use by department heads in reporting to the manager. There are some advantages in standardizing on the list of items reported to the council and in using them consistently each month in order to afford a basis for comparison and an analysis of trends. It is desirable to consult the wishes of the members of the council occasionally regarding the length of the report and the amount and kind of data they would like to have.

Monthly Report on Municipal Finances. Most city managers submit a monthly written financial report to the council even where there is no monthly report on departmental activities. Some councils want detailed financial statements while others want only brief reports. The maximum information of interest to the council probably can be set up in column form on three or four sheets as follows:

Income (itemized by source)

1. Budget estimate for current year.
2. Amount collected this month and this month last year.
3. Cumulative receipts through this month and this month last year.
4. Per cent of estimate collected through this month and this month last year.

Expenditures (itemized by appropriation)

1. Appropriation.
2. Obligations (i.e., commitments)--this month and this month last year.
3. Cumulative obligations through this month and this month last year.
4. Unencumbered balance of year's appropriation.
5. Per cent of appropriations obligated through this month and this month last year.

Monthly Forecast of Cash Position (itemized by funds)

1. Unencumbered cash balance.
2. Total estimated receipts to end of fiscal year.
3. Total estimated expenditures to end of fiscal year.
4. Estimated unencumbered cash balance.

It may be desirable occasionally for the manager to supplement the written financial report with charts and graphs showing trends over a period of time. The manager also should add a concise interpretation of the figures, and at the council meeting he should point out and explain significant changes or trends, as in tax collections, marked increase or decrease in expenditures during the month, circumstances which require transfers, and so on.

Other Periodic Reports. Some managers issue weekly or bi-weekly reports which are mailed to the council prior to a council meeting. The manager of Glencoe, Ill. (6,000), for example, prepares a typewritten news letter which is sent to councilmen every Friday. The manager in one or two pages summarizes the week's developments. This practice saves considerable time at council meetings because many questions asked by individual councilmen can be answered in writing for the information of all. A recent issue explained a new system of taxicab inspection and reasons for the change, outlined plans for cleanup week, indicated why the city was inspecting all hydrants, advised that the police chief had enrolled in the

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ICMA course in police administration, and answered specific questions received during the week from several councilmen (councilman's name given in each case) and the reason for action or lack of action on certain street lights, shrubbery, vacated alley, pavement across tracks, and so on. This inexpensive method of reporting has been well received by the council.

The city manager at Alameda, Calif., follows a similar procedure. Three or four days prior to the council meeting he submits a report to the councilmen on activities of the city manager's office since the previous meeting, explaining steps that have been taken or are about to be taken. The manager finds that such reports are useful in keeping the council informed so that they may answer intelligently most of the questions that may be directed to them during the week by citizens. The manager makes it a practice at conference sessions to answer any questions councilmen might have on matters covered in the report. The managers of a number of cities follow this same practice. For example, the manager at Lubbock, Tex. (30,000), issues a two-page news letter "to keep the city commission more closely informed regarding the administrative branch of the city government".

Another weekly report is the "City Manager's News Bulletin" of Kansas City, Mo., issued each Monday just prior to the weekly council meeting. The primary purpose of this two-page (one sheet on both sides) mimeographed bulletin is to inform members of the council on highlights of the activities of the administration during the preceding week. Brief items report improvements in services rendered, present comparative statistics, new studies undertaken, new and unusual activities or services, and any developments of interest in connection with the administration of any activity including plans for future activities and progress on public works projects. Each department head is responsible for submitting items.

Special Reports. In addition to periodic reports on activities and finances, the council needs reports on special subjects. A group of citizens appears at the council meeting to complain of inadequate fire protection in their neighborhood. A tavern-keeper requests permission to transfer his license to another location. A petition is presented which seeks the re-routing of a bus line. A delegation complains of flooded cellars and requests the construction of a storm sewer. Some home-owners want a certain street paved.

The council will look to the city manager for the necessary facts on all such matters and also for recommendations where pertinent. A simple verbal statement or explanation may be sufficient in the case of minor items, but reports dealing with important matters and containing recommendations by the manager should be reduced to writing as a matter of record. Certain matters initiated by the chief administrator also call for report; among them are requests for transfers between appropriations, the tabulation of bids for contracts requiring council approval, ordinances and resolutions drafted by the city manager, and any special subjects on which the city manager wishes to present recommendations.

No specific form or procedure can be recommended for special reports because of their varied character. Some may be rather lengthy, as in the case of a report on a proposed franchise, an analysis of insurance on city property, a utility rate litigation, a public improvement project, or a proposal for state legislative action. Most of the special reports, however, need only contain a concise statement of the essential facts, the possible courses of action (perhaps with statements of pro and con), and the city manager's recommendation, leaving further details to be supplied orally during the discussion in the council meeting.

Many of the special written reports are reviewed briefly at the council meeting by the manager who also usually recommends a course of action. Most special reports are brief and deal with matters that have been referred to the manager at previous council meetings. Another type of special report is the one initiated by the manager or one that may result from study on a problem discussed at a conference session and which represents considerable research and a review of the best practices developed in other cities. If such reports are lengthy and detailed the manager may prepare a summary and a proposed resolution or ordinance setting forth a policy for the council to adopt.

The managers of a few cities have adopted the practice of issuing mimeographed reports on special subjects. Berkeley, Calif. issues such reports in memo form numbered serially. Seven of these reports were submitted to the council in July, 1948. For example, "City Manager's Report No. 31" summarized in one page the present status of four proposed ordinances submitted to the council during the preceding 60 days and advised the council that the manager would discuss the ordinances further at the conference session prior to the next regular meeting with the hope that they could be brought to the floor and disposed of at an early date.

A somewhat similar plan is used in Richmond, Calif., where serially numbered bulletins in mimeographed form are submitted to the council on problems that require council action or on which the council should be informed. A recent three-page report outlined a suggested program for improving the police department and attached a proposed resolution declaring the policy of the council with respect to the promotion of members of the police force. Some of the reports, however, are only for the information of councilmen such as reproducing an exchange of letters on an important question.

A typical report prepared by the manager at the request of the council is a recent two-page mimeographed report prepared by the manager of University City, Mo., on the question of providing fire protection service outside the city limits. The report reviews general practice elsewhere based in part on information secured by the city through Management Information Service, discusses the legal aspects, cost of supplying the service, past experience of the city with outside calls, etc., and recommends a course of action.

A report dealing with an important matter may be prepared and distributed to the members of the council in advance of the meeting or it may not be presented until the council meets. Under the first plan, the manager requests council members to review the report before the meeting. Such reports usually are mimeographed and include practically all information which has been compiled on the subject so that the council can be well informed before action is taken. Many managers, however, prefer to present reports on special problems at the conference session or at the regular council meeting--especially if they deal with a confidential or controversial matter.

Other Methods of Reporting

The managers of some cities take the entire council on inspection trips at the time the annual budget is being considered and a few managers have experimented with motion pictures as a means of keeping councilmen informed. The council also may be informed through reporting to council committees, attendance of department heads at council meetings (at request of manager), use of the agenda for the next council meeting, and through reporting to the council when it meets in conference session prior to the regular meeting. These methods are discussed briefly below.

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Inspection Trips. The managers of some cities take councilmen on one or more inspection trips of municipal activities at the time that the proposed annual budget is being considered. They believe that these trips will eliminate the handicaps the average councilman may face if he takes trips "on his own." These handicaps are: (1) Difficulty in disrupting his own business and daily routine, (2) natural embarrassment in being seen by the administrative staff and perhaps being considered a "snooper", (3) ineffectiveness because of poor explanation to supplement casual observation, (4) feeling of "leave it to the manager"...that a councilman spends enough time attending council meetings. One manager anticipates that these inspections "will go far in developing and maintaining effective teamwork between the council and the manager." This "demonstration" method of reporting to the council is useful in acquainting councilmen with capital improvement programs and municipal needs and also provides material for newspapers, but the manager cannot expect councilmen to devote much time to such trips.

Movies. Motion pictures or slide films sometimes are an effective method of reporting. One small city of about 6,000 population has made motion pictures of municipal work to secure a permanent record and also for use in reporting municipal activities to the council. The city manager shows one or more reels to augment some of the more formal reports. In the first three months after the city purchased the necessary equipment seven motion pictures comprising 500 feet of film were taken. Subjects of the pictures included: (1) a zoning problem which gave sufficient information to enable the council to settle the matter at this one meeting. (2) A reel showing seal-coating of asphaltic streets, other street improvements, and bad sidewalks to show need for general sidewalk repairs, improvement of parks. (3) Pictures showing the operation of sewage disposal plants in other towns for the information of the council in connection with a proposed plant for the city. Some of these films also were used later by women's clubs, public schools, and service clubs. The manager of this city reported that "the use of motion pictures in reporting to the council has been of real value in their deliberations".

Council Committees. Cities operating under the council-manager plan have few if any standing committees but special committees often are appointed. The manager should assemble the data required for the proper consideration of the subject and the manager should attend committee meetings; in fact the mayor often designates the manager as a member of special committees. Standing committees often are useful in holding public hearings on proposed regulatory ordinances. Department heads and other officials designated by the manager should attend such committee hearings and furnish advice. The manager may report on the same problem to the entire council, particularly if a controversial issue is involved or if the manager feels that his point of view may not be adequately presented by the committee to the city council as a whole.

Department Heads. Department heads at the request of the manager often prepare reports or statements on given matters but the manager seldom submits such reports directly to the council. He either submits a written summary of the significant points from the point of view of the council or he presents a summary of the report orally. On important matters the manager uses both methods. If the departmental report is an engineering or technical study, it may be presented in full with a brief memo from the manager summarizing the chief points and giving the manager's recommendation. If there is likely to be discussion in the council meeting the manager may request the department head to attend and answer questions raised by the council. No report should be submitted by department heads directly to the council and no oral reports should be given by department heads at a council meeting unless requested by the manager.

Department heads should not be prohibited from furnishing information to individual council members when the request relates to some routine matter, but there should be an understanding between the council members and the manager that only routine information is to be secured directly from department heads. Where such an understanding is abused the manager is justified in instructing department heads to refer all councilmanic requests on administrative matters to him. Department heads should be instructed to furnish the manager's office with copies of correspondence or memos which are sent to the councilmen at their request. As a general principle, however, information for the council or for individual councilmen should clear through the manager's office.

Informal Council Meetings. Another method of reporting to the council is through an informal conference meeting which usually is held in the mayor's office or manager's office prior to the regular council meeting. This meeting sometimes is called an executive session, pre-council meeting, or committee of the whole meeting. The manager more or less leads the discussion of subjects before the council at the informal meeting. Some managers prepare a brief agenda listing all the subjects which the manager desires to discuss with the council, as well as items which councilmen or department heads desire to discuss at the informal meeting.

Items are placed on the agenda by calling the manager's office or are requested to be put on at the previous conference meeting. The agenda indicates the subjects to be discussed, the estimated time required for each, and the names of the participants. The participants and the members of the administrative staff are notified by the manager's office of the time their subject is to be discussed at the meeting. The bottom of the agenda form may be devoted to "remarks", this space being used by the manager to make notations concerning the results of the discussion.

This informal meeting of the council, especially when the council consists of nine or fewer members, is preferable to having standing committees. It takes no more time on the part of the administrative staff to gather data and make reports to the council as a whole than it does to a committee of the council and it is the experience of managers that the material when thus submitted is more readily accepted and understood and much time is saved. (For suggested council rules covering conference sessions see MIS Report No. 31 for January, 1947, page 3.)

Agenda for Council Meetings. The agenda for regular council meetings is sometimes used by managers as a method of reporting. The agenda is mailed in advance to councilmen and if any council member desires additional information on any item of business he can contact the city manager's office or bring up his question at the conference meeting. The agenda in some cities is handed to the councilmen at the conference meeting, where it is reviewed by the manager who should be thoroughly familiar with every item whether it is prepared in his office or in the office of the city clerk. (For suggestions on preparing the agenda for council meetings see MIS Report No. 46 issued in December, 1947.)

Note: City officials may obtain on request to MIS loan copies of periodic reports issued by several city managers.

